

#MyNewarkStory
Youth Writing Contest



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Introduction

In the 2022/2023 school year, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Newark Public Library teamed up to ask Newark high school-age youth to write their Newark stories.

Animated by the legacy of Philip Roth, who told his own Newark story over and over again, NJPAC and the Library wanted to hear today's young Newarkers tell about their own Newark in their own voices. The youth writers could create short stories, essays, or memoirs. The project took the form of a writing contest, and the winning pieces are printed here.

The project took place under the banner of *Philip Roth Unbound: Illuminating a Literary Legacy*, a three day Festival in Newark celebrating and agitating the work of Philip Roth. One festival event, "My Newark," showcased contemporary Newark storytellers' original, dynamic work. The two top winners of the youth writing contest read their pieces at the event the first night of the festival, joining the ranks of published Newark storytellers.

This collection publishes the top 14 winning entries from the writing contest. Here are THEIR NEWARK STORIES.

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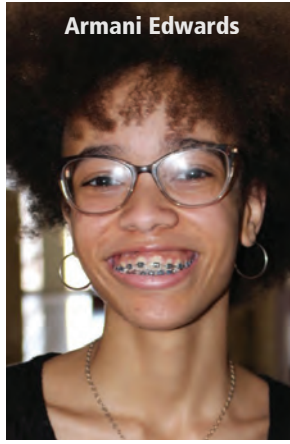
Olamide Adekoya



Risqat Adeniji



Armani Edwards



Gianna Garcia



Yewande Hamzat



Sasha Hector



Xanaria Jackman



Naomi Jeffries



Mariana Nolasco



Our Authors

Esther Ojo



Lara Parada-Tixe



Aman Shah



Anie Velez



Nicole Velez



Grades 9 & 10



Home Away From Home

Olamide Adekoya

Science Park High School | Short Story | First Place

The crowd went wild with excitement at our team's downfall. The feeling in the locker room wasn't any different. Coach hung his head in embarrassment, realizing the repercussions of his overconfidence at the school the past week. All he'd done was brag to everyone at Central High School how his basketball team was going to bring home the trophy once again.

"What exactly is going on out there?"

Silence.

He scoffed, immediately locking eyes with me. I sank lower to the ground.

"We went over game plays yesterday, didn't we? This shouldn't be this hard!"

The locker room stayed quiet. His eyes then darted to other players, fury written all over his face. "What?! Y'all not going to answer me?"

I held back my wave of tears. This game was the first time I'd finally gotten the courage to pursue my goal of being a point guard. Deon, one of the first friends I made when I moved to Newark, had allowed a sudden breakup with the 'love of his life' to affect his previously byous performance as point guard. I couldn't believe I'd taken his position just to continue that line of disappointment.

However, it wasn't time for me to wallow in my self loathing. As the team captain, it was up to me to ensure that all was going according to plan even when it seems like it's all going off rails.

"Coach, we got this. We just wanted to gauge how serious they were -turns out, they aren't here to play."

I sighed at my unfortunate effort to cheer up the crowd. Coach just stared at me like he was regretting letting the team choose who was captain.

Before leaving the room, his hands folded in obvious discontent, he says:

"Deal with this, Kunle" "Damn, I feel like I can finally breathe." Ja'quan exclaims what everyone else must've thought.

"Hey, hey, c'mon, let's be nice here." I shook out my leg for what seemed like the fourth time that hour. It was getting impossible to ignore the recurring pain. "You guys know it's hard for Coach to accept defeat."

"What's even going on out there?" Bayo asked in his struggling Americanized accent. He'd been one of the new arrivals from Nigeria at my church and it was obvious he was struggling to fit in. It was around the time my parents shared their first blows with each other, so I looked for any excuse to be away from

home. I talked to him about joining the team and after some aggressive negotiation with his parents, he became our team's greatest bench warmer.

Sebastian, our center, stood up -head almost reaching the ceiling and all."
I was about to ask that; we nervous or what?"

"I mean, probably. Don't you see those guys out there? They're Vailsburg like the rich of the rich."

That got everyone to laugh.

"Baba, shouldn't we be trying to cheer us up? What's with this sad atmosphere?"

Hector put his hands around Bayo's shoulders, pulling him into a bro hug. After they pulled apart, Hector yelled a bit too loud, "Let's give it up for our little benchie, always warming up the seats for us!" My head immediately turned in fear of Bayo's reaction but he was laughing along with everyone else. I was proud of how far we'd both come. This team really did become our healing ridge.

I cleared my throat to get everyone's attention, signaling that we only have about 7 minutes left. "Guys, who cares if we're from Newark? Who cares if they have the funding we don't? Who cares if they look the epitome of class? What it comes down to is our performance on the court and we have trained for the past 2 weeks for this game! We were beasts yesterday at Branch Brook, I need that energy back! Remember the game play and let's show them how we really do it!"

Per tradition, we set our hands on top of each other and responded with the same chant: "Really do it!"

"Alright, let's go out there and get them crying for their mums!"

"Nah, Kunle, bruh, that was so trash."

"Yeah dude, you sounded like an 8 year old trying to roast someone."

"Ight, ight, whatever. I'm so done with you guys" I said, already running out with the rest of the team before Bayo pulled me back.

"What's up with your leg?" As if on cue, the pain starts up again, sending a thrill up my leg. "I saw you limping all through the game and even now, you're leaning."

I shook my head, denying all truths in his statement. "I'm fine, don't worry."

I wasn't fine.

In the middle of the second half, during a rather intense dribbling—than should have been—with the other team's point guard, I twisted my ankle which again, hurt more than it should've. I may have dramatically fallen down in the middle of the court, causing a panic for the other players but it was worth it. Yes, I did lose my already failing dignity but it prevented them from getting that 3-pointer and that, in my book, would always be an achievement worth bragging about.

Upon much struggle, because I didn't want my mum knowing I went back to playing ball even after she warned me not to, Coach carried me to Beth Israel. He said he was going to talk to her to calm her down but that sounded even worse and I felt embarrassed that I couldn't fulfill the one simple role I was given on the team. Now, I was even dragging the team down due to my negligence.

Before I could tell, my head was in between my hands and my tears flowed like rivers of water.

"Hey, Kunle." Coach squatted in front of me and pulled down my hands, trying to get a clear sight of my face. It reminded me of how my dad was back in Nigeria now, he was just the man that chewed out my ears whenever he had the chance. Of course, I couldn't forget the fact that he called me an embarrassment every time he felt like it.

The sight of my mum at the door with a piece of paper on her head interrupted the moment, sending my tears back in reverse. Coach stood up and greeted her but she ignored him, walking towards me. She threw a piece of paper at me and with trembling hands, I opened it up. This time, I really couldn't stop the tears.

"I tell you something and you don't listen. Can you see yourself? No, se mi o so fun e(didn't I tell you?) Do you see where you have gotten yourself? Like father, like son. The both of you, you never listen to advice that they give you."

My mum was probably still ranting about how much of a failure I was but I wasn't listening anymore. The words on the piece of paper in front of me was proof enough that nothing was on my side.

I may not be able to walk for a while.

I muttered the words back to myself, each time increasing the pain in my heart than the previous. Coach walked up to me and I showed him the letter. My mum was probably still talking but his words stood with me.

"None of this is your fault, okay? You have shouldered so much responsibility this past few months and you've never once complained about it. You've instead kept it all bottled up with a smile on your face. You are an amazing human being and I couldn't be prouder having you on my team. Think of this as a break and the next time, come back as the best point guard I know you can be."

Walking with crutches is not an easy task. Running with crutches was even worse. I almost started to miss when I could roll my wheelchair down the hospital halls.

But running by Branch Brook Park, the cool summer breeze making the trees wave and with these crazy basketball freaks that just really care about me getting better, I think about how much I don't regret the past two years in Newark. This team became a Home Away From Home, a place where I could run to whenever 'family' became too hard. ■



A Date at the Garden of Soldiers

Nicole Velez

Science Park High School | Short Story | Second Place

The heavy rap in her ears roared at full volume. The train moved faster and faster, rocking her body back and forth in her seat. After a couple minutes, she took off her headphones and heard the monotone voice through the train's loudspeaker saying, "This stop: Military Park. This is the train to Penn Station. You must have a valid ticket to ride this train."

She walked off the train with no ticket in her hand as always. Her heart raced as she took in the rancid smell of the Military Park Station. Walking up the steps leading out of the station, she felt the autumn breeze hit her face and blow her brown curls away from her face. Through all the noise from cars honking impatiently and drivers yelling, she spotted him.

He waved and crossed the street to reach her, all while flashing a warm smile. He gave her a hug and handed her a drink he bought her at the Starbucks next to Blaze Pizza. He didn't ask what she wanted, but he knew somehow. A cold Strawberry Açaí with extra strawberries. How could an act so sweet become so bitter?

After walking and talking for almost an hour, they decided to stop and sit at a bench and look at the people passing down Broad Street together. *I've never met a boy who just wanted to observe and not touch, she thought.* She liked the change.

The sun's warm light reflecting off the surrounding skyscrapers was fading slowly as they laughed and giggled. She was engaged because there was no awkward tension. He was asking important questions and she didn't feel the need to respond with a watered-down version of the truth. He was an interesting character. It was difficult for her to find people in Newark who shared the same dream of making it out. Most teens don't believe they'll ever go that far. Some don't even make it to the age where they should be thinking about it.

It was so easy for her to admire his features while he talked about his own desires and goals. She noticed the frizz of his curls and the slight lisp of his full, smooth lips when he spoke his words. His eyes squinted when he smiled and his tall, lanky body leaned towards her. During her overanalysis of his face and body, his warm hand that rested on her thigh moved up gradually.

She trusted it would have a stop point. It didn't.

Not a word left her mouth. Not even a soft "stop." As his hands reached up her skirt, she hoped—in vain—that someone would see. The only witnesses, however, were the park's eroding stone statues of war veterans, and they didn't

seem to be alarmed. For what felt like eternity, she didn't speak and let him go through with it until he finished. He asked what was wrong as he pulled away with a slight smirk on his face. She shook her head with a blank stare to the ground and he got up and extended a hand out to her. She didn't take it, but she did get up with him. The walk back to the station was silent. He dropped her off at the station. Obviously, there were no goodbyes or thank yous. She hopped on the empty train and shed a few silent tears to melancholic music playing through her headphones until she got to her stop—Bloomfield Ave—and walked home. That moment stayed between her and the Light Rail.

One could say she let it happen. She opened up and let herself feel comfortable. She walked back with him to the station. Why didn't she say 'no' or stop him? Those thoughts haunted her for a while. *He* haunted her for a while. Every weekday morning, she took the Light Rail to Norfolk Street to get to school, and it reminded her daily of what happened. She could not escape the voices of guilt shouting in her head whenever she stepped on a train.

As a little girl, she dreamed of having two kids, a boy and a girl. She dreamed of maintaining them with her future job as a lawyer. But after that day, her dreams were dead and buried deep in the ground. She never went on another date. Ideally, she hoped to never let herself fall in love with anybody. In her eyes, she would've never been betrayed if she never trusted him in the first place. Her walls were up, and no one would ever succeed in breaking them down. Her story isn't a "Newark story" because people like the anonymous boy in this story are exclusive to only Newark. It isn't a Newark story just because it takes place in Newark, either. This is a Newark story because Newarkers are dreamers. Our great Brick City was originally built on the backs of people of color and immigrants, arguably the biggest dreamers themselves. Unfortunately, like the young girl in this story, our promising youth is exposed to violence and hate from a young age, killing their soul and bringing their dreams down with them. ■

"Obviously, there were no goodbyes or thank yous. She hopped on the empty train and shed a few silent tears to melancholic music playing through her headphones until she got to her stop—Bloomfield Ave—and walked home. That moment stayed between her and the Light Rail."



973

Yewande Hamzat

Science Park High School | Memoir | Third Place

9

My mom and dad began considering moving to Newark, New Jersey, around 9 years ago. Trying to raise 3 children in the Bronx projects had proven to be both a financially and emotionally taxing task, especially for 2 parents who had practically just arrived from Nigeria. I still remember moving the little we had out of our apartment, monsoon levels of rain beating us as we packed an entire life into the trunk of our Acura. At the age of 5, I didn't truly realize how permanent the change would be, how fully New Jersey and Newark in particular would ingrain itself into every aspect of my life, every fiber of my being. Nor did I begin calling the place home right away. However, passing through the New Jersey Turnpike, late at night and being rocked to sleep by the car, I was aware enough to know that my life wouldn't be the same as it was just hours prior. 9 years ago, I unknowingly faced the rest of my life as I knew it.

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I really started feeling the change once I had started school at North Star Academy Alexander Street Elementary. My 7 letter name, displayed on my desk on a pencil theme name tag. Up till that point, the only people I had really known were my brother, my sister, my mom and my dad, along with some of the aunts from our church. All of them had the same Nigerian blood flowing through them as I did, and just the right way to understand the world my name had come from. However, most teachers and kids in Newark didn't.

"Is it Yee-wandee?"

"Uhm... is it.. Yuh-wun-duh?"

"Any nicknames I can call you? How about Wendy?"

The cultural shock had hit me all at once! My world had expanded beyond my home at Brookdale Avenue, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, into a domain in which 32 different people had 32 different names to call me, all 8 hours of the day. My 7 lettered name had become far more complex, taken out the hands of my bubble and thrust out to the world, to be interpreted in ways I couldn't even process yet. Newark had proven itself to be unknown territory, and with a larger scope than I initially intended. With time, though, the many ways in which Newark had perceived me became part of my character. With age, as I had learned to correct the people who got my name wrong, I accepted the many ways in which people saw me. I never lost myself, but as I began to see Newark more as home, being called Wendy wasn't so much of a threat as it was a sign of me being welcomed.

3

Not everything that Newark changed for me could be as quickly accepted though, and that's when I turned to my siblings. For as long as I had known, it was always the 3 of us, and New Jersey would only make our bonds stronger. My siblings had primarily been the ones to explore the city, fill me in on the locations of the bodegas, give me tips on how to handle certain teachers and always provided a safe space for me to be myself. We hopped houses 3 times, we split into 3 different schools, and yet it doesn't take away the times we've spent trekking around the state fair together. My siblings are what truly made Newark familiar, and turned such an unfamiliar environment into home.

Area code 973, the Brick City, Newark NJ has become an integral part of where I live. The place where my parents have been able to build a place for themselves, truly brick by brick, turning it into a safe place for me and my siblings to live. Despite me not being fluent in every part of the Newark culture, despite not seeing all parts of the city, living here has become a staple part of my life. The friends I've made here, the roads to my home that become familiar every time we drive past them, the stray cats I try to approach on the street—Newark has silently become the backdrop for my youth, and I can't imagine growing up in any other setting. ■

Your Own Symphony

Xanaria Jackman

*Donald M. Payne Sr. School Of Technology | Essay
Honorable Mention*

When people think of Newark, they might think of trash and empty cans laying on the streets, gangs and endless crime happening every week. They think of “hood rats” living in the projects, who haven’t learned something called civilization. They see failure. But what is the real Newark? It’s the place where I have grown up all my life. We weren’t born with silver spoons. We come from immigrants, looking for a better life. Descendants of slaves who were left to fend for themselves. Scraping together what little they had to build something out of nothing. At times, it feels like our parents are stuck in an endless cycle of oppression, trying to find ways they can make a better life for their children.

My name is Xanaria Jackman. I’ve grown up sleeping in those government-owned apartments. I walk those streets that are sometimes covered in muck and filth. I live here. Yet, how can someone who has never stepped foot in Newark call



my home a failure? Newark is like a melody. Maybe a guitar or a piano that's just missing its second beat. The children who are here today are like different instruments. Each plays its part. Sometimes we make a mistake and it can throw the song off-key. However, music is a wave and with the right tuning, we will be in harmony again. Newark is like an unfinished symphony that has yet to be played by an orchestra. This is my Newark Story.

Half of my family comes from a line of immigrants who moved to Newark. My grandmother, who passed away a few years ago, was born in Liberia. My Grandfather is Panamanian. Both came here wishing for only one thing: a start to a better life. They found that here. My mother is a teacher. She has taught children for over fifteen years, bringing knowledge to youth and helping them build a better life for themselves. I've watched her in classrooms teach grades K-8. Whether it was ABC's or the Pythagorean Theorem, she would educate each child, helping them find their own sense of sound for Newark. A lot of the students she teaches come from low-income families, though they still aspire to learn and create new things. I myself work with children in a summer camp called the Afterschool All Stars. A non-profit organization. I see students learn and play, I see them create. My mother is one of the strongest people and role models I have ever known. She adds her own beat to Newark.

I have one other sibling here too. He runs and plays like other kids. Though, he can't always catch up. Despite what some may think, I was born perfectly healthy. A bit short in stature, but still your typical black curly-haired African American girl. I aspire to enter law in hopes of one day giving back to my community. I enjoy anime, art, poetry, and music. My life revolves around music! Music is everywhere. Newark is filled with unique sounds and ideas, some of which you can't get anywhere else. It could be the sound of kids playing and yelling outside, the corner store coffee machine that finally starts to work, or the sound of my mom's voice when she tells me I should clean the dishes.

There's always a perfect sound somewhere. I never cared about who it was from or where it was from, as long as it told a story. With just an instrument, you can find out so much about a person. Their joys and sorrows. Even their most embarrassing moments. If you ask me, you can put any moment into a song. This is how I see Newark. Newark may have the wrong keys played at first, but the wrong key has a chance to become the right one. As of now in my school, I'm working on ways to get students more involved with the community which I am calling the MTC Project. MTC stands for "Make the Change." These changes are small now. I'm just helping students learn about our school and how to work together but I hope to one day stretch it out further. I want to turn Newark into a symphony.

Newark, like all towns, starts with its community. I remember when I was little living on Bruce Street playing with friends and going to see the icy lady right down the block. She always had this one particular flavor, grape lemonade. We

paid her a dollar and she would open the freezer and hand us frozen juice in a styrofoam cup. Then we would go on, where we would play games like tag and hide and seek. Once the lights came on we headed inside and went to bed. Those things seemed small, but it was the world to me. Though we no longer live there, I still consider it one of the most fundamental parts of my childhood. It was where I was first introduced to a community. Friends from all ages and backgrounds. It's part of what makes me.

Now, I'm a sophomore in high school, I'm in honors classes and I'm a part of the Student Council. As I get older I start to recognize more of my community. Where I come from. Two of my classmates from my middle school year sadly passed away before we made it to high school. As I've been given more opportunities to look outside of Newark, I learned that this simple world I lived in was anything but simple. I started to realize the difference between other students and me regarding money and education. I am someone who came from nothing; all I have are the people around me. Does it make me a failure? The way I look at it, it only gives me more to gain.

Newarkers are scrapers. We learn and build off our surroundings. Those who had a chance to see what education can get us strive to their full potential to reach their goals. That's what makes Newark beautiful, because it allows us to realize and think about what it can become. Newark is a chance to help feed a starving mind. When they combine Newark and the word failure, all I see is ignorance. Newark is a chance to build a new beginning. Newark is an orchestra that has only begun its performance. ■

Purple

Gianna Garcia

Newark School of Fashion and Design
Short Story | Honorable Mention

Newark is like the color purple. To make purple you mix red and blue together. Two very bold colors with a lot of character. Purple is also my favorite color. It can be subtle, it can blow you away, and it can make you see things in a different way. Newark is like purple and it's also my home. I have lived here for all fifteen years of my life. I honestly love it here. A good amount of kids at my school complain about living in Newark. They only see the negative. They see crime. They see gray skies everyday. I see that as well. But I also see Newark as the place of my family. My grandfather knows so many people I can't keep count. My father who protects my family and stands his ground. My mother who is caring and teaches the possible future president of the United States. My sister,



GIANNA GARCIA

who is someday going to be one of the greatest psychologists in the world. Then that leaves me, a young high school student who goes to a fashion school, loves to read romance novels, and hopefully someday can write her own novel as well.

One of my favorite things to do in Newark is to stare out the window by my desk. Across the street there is this gorgeous house that has been abandoned for many years now. It used to be owned by a pianist. There's something about that house that appeals to me. Maybe it's the history, maybe the old look of it. I just love it. It's one of my favorite things about Newark. I also like to go to Mt. Prospect and visit Melanies, which is conveniently named after my mom! I love Melanies. The bread and butter is like heaven in your mouth. Every time I go there I sit in my seat, the first counter seat. It's a little wobbly but I don't mind the adventure. I grew up there and I'm basically a local. I also like to go visit my grandfather's office which is located in the back by the parking lot. When I step foot in there it's like a walk through history. When you walk in, you are met with a lot of posters and signs that include a Cuban baseball player named El Deque. We are very proud Cubans in this family.

There is also a family picture of us in front of the family hardware store that used to be there. Caceres Hardware. It was a magical place. It was first owned by great grandfather Hilario “Chacho” Caceres. After he passed away in 2013 the city of Newark even memorialized him by renaming the block in his honor. It is now known as Hilario Caceres Plaza. The store was then passed down to my grandfather Joaquin Caceres. Our hardware store also made history by being the first Hispanic owned hardware store in the city of Newark.

Sadly in 2016, it was closed and became a Domino’s. But that history never goes away. It stays with me. It becomes one with me. My family, especially my grandfather, is pretty well known around the great city of Newark. When I was younger many people who saw me would always say “Oh you’re Joaquin’s granddaughter.” I always got annoyed because I was young and I wanted to be my own person. But now as I’ve grown up I’m proud of who I am, especially proud of my family’s accomplishments and contributions to Newark.

But living in Newark is not only special to me because of my family’s history here. Newark is special to me because it’s part of me. Spending the summer in my backyard blasting Harry Styles, Taylor Swift, or 5 Seconds of Summer. My sister and I loved introducing all of these artists to my Spanish speaking family. I never learned Spanish, which is sometimes hard. Therefore I just use context clues. Fake it till you make it, am I right! Spanish music is a big part of me as well, whether I understand or not it will always be in my veins.

Even during the holiday season or summer break, Newark was also a host in a way that even sometimes words can’t describe. This type of feeling is created by emotions or actions. Like when you scream the lyrics to your favorite song during a late night drive around the neighborhood. It makes you feel warm and welcomed. But most of all it makes you feel like you’re at home. It’s your safe space.

I think what makes Newark my home is not only the city, but the people in it. I am proud to be from Newark. It has shaped me to become the young independent lady I am today. It has provided me with an education that has made an impact. It has also given me so many memories that I will cherish forever and never forget. No matter where I go, Newark will always be a part of my life. ■

“My grandfather knows so many people I can’t keep count. My father who protects my family and stands his ground. My mother who is caring and teaches the possible future president of the United States. My sister, who is someday going to be one of the greatest psychologists in the world.”

The Only Place

Armani Edwards

Newark School of Fashion and Design
Memoir | Honorable Mention

There is only one place where I truly feel alive.

Only one place where sitting on the floor surrounded by the aura of stories can become my solitude.

I find warmth within the smallness of the Branch Brook Park Library.

I've been in crowded libraries with shelves of books everywhere you look, and all you can focus on is the beautiful architecture of the building. But I feel as if that makes the people and the stories within the books become insignificant and small.

And the world already does that enough, doesn't it?

That's why I find such beauty in the Branch Brook Park Library. When I walk in there I don't just see papers and pretty covers.

I see characters that have hugged my heart and the places I've been to without moving a muscle.

I see librarians that are no longer blank faces and have become friends.

I see a home.

So I say hi to the librarians, walk to the corner of the small library and sit on the uncomfortable floor, surrounded by classic books I'm too intimidated to read because Charles Dickens and Jane Austen are 'timeless authors' and I'm afraid to dislike them. I put on my wired headphones, classical music softly flowing through them, take my book out of my tote bag. Then, I read.

I forget the terrors of reality.

I forget that when I first moved to Newark my mom, my brother and I were walking home at night when a man started harassing my mother. I forget the fear I felt when he started to attempt to pull her down to the floor. I forget the relief I felt when another man that happened to be at the right place at the right time grabbed the cruel man and told my mom, my brother, and I to run across the street. I forget the exhaustion I felt after running the rest of the way home.

I forget how isolated I felt since I left all of my friends in New York to move to Newark.

I forget the self-pity I was ashamed to feel because for some reason I couldn't seem to have a human connection with anyone.

I forget the self-hatred I felt once online school started and my grades went down since my grades were the only thing I was proud of myself for.

I forget all of it.

[illegible]

Because I'm no longer myself in the Library.

I become a part of the shelves and the silent air that runs through the Library.

I become the pages of the stories I've read.

I become the ink of the words that have made me feel seen.

But then, everything rushes back into my head when I close my book. I take off my headphones, stand up and stretch because I finally notice the throbbing pain in my back. I say "Have a good day" to the librarians.

I slowly walk down the stairs and open the door that divides reality and the Library. And I walk out, feeling disappointed that the only place I love has office hours. ■

Newark: The Diversified Palette

Risqat Adeniji

Science Park High School | Short Story | Honorable Mention

BEEP BEEP BEEP!

My alarm clock goes off, leaving me smashing my hands around the table for the snooze button. For a second, I think about going back to sleep until I realize that I live in a household of 6. If I didn't get into the bathroom in the next two minutes, I wouldn't get to use it at all. Carefully, I mapped out a shortcut that I would use to get to the bathroom on the first floor. It was the good one, right next to the kitchen. Sure, there were two bathrooms. I mean, what kind of crazy household consists of six people but only one bathroom? Not us, I'll tell you that. Unfortunately, no one ever wanted to go to the bathroom near the descending basement stairs. It was the so-called "haunted" one. All my siblings refused to go in because apparently, the ghost of Aunt Jibola was down there. She was mom's old friend and one of those crazy aunts that just can't stay out of your business even though what you're talking about doesn't concern them at all. With all the things that she knew about our lives without us telling her, we were convinced that she was secretly a ghost who haunted our house at night and told us what she somehow managed to dig up on us during her night hunt the next day. Even our mom couldn't stand her because when you live in a Black, African household as big as ours, the last thing you want is for another nosy person to be all up in your business. I swiftly got up from the bed I shared with my sister, Gracie, somehow managing not to wake her up. I grabbed all the things that I needed in the bathroom, including my towels and toothbrush.



The last time I left a toothbrush in the bathroom, Grace and her middle child attitude clearly felt smart one day and used it to wash the toilets. Being the sensible person that I am, I let her get away with it, only giving her a well-deserved slap to the face. Sure I got yelled at and punished by my mom the next day, but it was worth it to see the smirk wiped off her face after that slap. I quickly used the bathroom and hopped out before someone came out of their room and started knocking on the bathroom door as if there was a zombie apocalypse happening outside. It seemed like everyone only needed to use the bathroom after I went in. I slipped on the freshly ironed school uniform that I had laid out for myself the night before. Making my way downstairs to the kitchen, I was met by my mother holding a bowl of jollof rice in one hand and a cup of tea in the other, setting both down on the wide dinner table. I kneeled in greeting and sat in my chair, eating my bowl of rice with a quickened pace, rushing not to be late again for school. If I made it to school early today, I would break my 56 day late streak. I was not very proud of this streak, despite what you may think. After breakfast, I ran out the door and started making my way down the street, taking in every sight I saw on my way to school. I leaped into the calm air of the Newark streets. At the first red light, I saw my friends, Zahrah and Khadijah, waving at me from the front of Masjid, their matching hijabs and abayas swaying in the wind. I waved back, making sure they saw

me before crossing the street after the light turned green. It was the middle of spring so I saw a cherry blossom tree almost on every block. They were graciously pink and vibrant, as if someone had generously put in the effort of taking care of them every day. The sun hit my face at the same extremity as the gentle breeze brushed through the parting of my braids. I smiled widely as I walked past Mrs. Smith's house, seeing her puppy, Daisy, peeking and then barking at me through the window. Her cute bark always made my day even better than it could have possibly been. I continued walking, even after being caught in a crowd of teen students in uniform colors distinct enough to make up an entirely new rainbow. Teens of every color walked past, with me completely that diverse palette of people. I saw sweet, corny couples holding hands as they either made their way to school together or grabbed a quick breakfast from nearby fast food restaurants.

Some of them I knew from the community gatherings and programs at parks or universities while others, I was seeing for the first time. I saw wide murals depicting the role of art in our communities, saw stores opening up for a brand new day, and heard music of all genres coming from both cars zooming by and houses I walked past. As I got closer to the school, I saw Andrew and Mark making their way towards me, their hands entwined. Walking towards the entrance of the school, we joined the line of students waiting to enter. I saw friends from the debate team, GSA, tutoring, the volleyball team, and the future teachers club. Everyone had squeezed themselves into some kind of circle and stuck with it. Unlike them, I bounced across every club and team at school. From the volunteer work to the tournaments, I loved all the opportunities that the clubs had to offer. All of these opportunities, present in mostly all schools in this city, reflected people of different ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and religious backgrounds finding unity within similar interests. With a face held high and a confident stare, I walked inside the school, ready for a new, fulfilling day that only my city can provide. ■

"At the first red light, I saw my friends, Zahrah and Khadijah, waving at me from the front of Masjid, their matching hijabs and abayas swaying in the wind. I waved back, making sure they saw me before crossing the street after the light turned green...I continued walking, even after being caught in a crowd of teen students in uniform colors distinct enough to make up an entirely new rainbow."

Newark: Breaking Fast

Aman Shah

*Science Park High School | Short Story
Honorable Mention*

Mason awoke from his slumber.

Where am I? Oh, wait

He sat up so straight, that you may have questioned if you were. Yawning profusely, he forced himself to get out of bed to start a productive day.

Waking up was a strange feeling. Especially to the silence, an undisturbed yet disorienting quiet. Yet there was another silence. A silence of loneliness. A need for another to nourish him. Mason needed some comfort.

He ushered himself toward the bathroom and discharged. He then washed his face, brushed his teeth, and combed his hair. Once out, he began his trek, closer to the living room. He could smell the coffee from here.

“Mom? Dad?”

He peeked into the kitchen, to find his mother and father cooperating on what to make for breakfast. Coffee would undoubtedly be a key element.

“Mason, set up the table. Also, take the coffee after you’re done.” His mother ordered. “Yes, mom.”

He went to the dining table and placed the coasters, cups, plates, knives, and forks in place.

He seized a water bottle and took a philanthropic sip.

Whimsical water. Wanderlust. Warranted wave. Withholding wheeze.

His parents walked out of the kitchen and placed fried eggs and a salad onto the table. His father went back to the kitchen to fetch some sugar.

Mason’s mother sat across from him.

“Eat.”

Mason grabbed a knife, and cut the fried egg into three equal pieces. He took a slice and then proceeded to take the salad his father made.

“Grapes? Cubed Apples? He even drizzled on Worcestershire sauce too?” Mason was bewildered. He has never known that his father can concoct a salad that would incorporate so much variety.

“Your father is smart. He’s just lazy. He could have gotten us a house by now, but he refuses to.” His mother smirked.



“Then why can’t we just leave this apartment?” Mason pondered, pouring some salad onto his plate, and grabbing a fork. “Why should I be the one to hold the burden?”

His mother looked at him sternly. “If we had the education as kids, we would have approached this country being wealthy... Or perhaps dwelled in Ukraine, which isn’t a safe option right now. We left because we wanted to start fresh, to find a new environment. You were born in America to be an American. You may be of Slavic descent, yet your nationality is American. Understand?” She bit into a grape.

Mason poked the fried egg. “Do I really have to carry a legacy that’s nonexistent? Can’t I just lead a normal life? Getting a job where I can pay for a house without worry seems nearly inconceivable.”

“It’s why you were born in Newark. Wonder why we chose this place, of all places?” His mother stared at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Why?”

His mother placed her fork down. “In a country full of privileged people, you must learn to struggle, and shine among the rest. Kids in America have it easy: They learn, they play, and whatnot. Back in Luhansk, there were no pampered kids. We

all devoured one another, like wolves, all in the hope to become the next authority. Everyone wanted to rule, no matter what their pros and cons were. Yet I was weak, and so was your father.” His mother looked at him in the kitchen, pouring coffee beans into two cups. “I was more promising than him, that is for sure”

Mason cringed. “Right...”

“Anyways, what I am trying to say is... Newark is similar. Back in the 2000s, it was alright. More crime, but soon, it calmed down. But your father and I knew that it would be a perfect place to grow. A lot of the Newarkers know your father, so they help him out since he has been here so long.”

“How long?”

“He came here around the time NJPAC was opened. 1997.” His mom prodded her food. “He returned to Ukraine to find me, and I agreed to marry him. Strange how he remembered me, of all people, and now wanted to take me to America!” Her eyes glistened. “I came to Newark around the time when the Prudential Center was being built. 2007. The year you were born.”

Mason nodded.

“Now, Newark is more competitive than other places in America. Yet also lenient, like the towns and villages. Enough to keep you on your feet, but also enough to not totally stress you out. We could have moved to a more advanced city, like New York. But Newark is the superior New York; the true grounds of opportunity. A perfect balance between hardship and ease. The people here may be relatively unknown to the common people, but one thing is for sure: Newarkers care about thriving. Ever since Ras Baraka became mayor, many things started to turn around for the better.”

“Ras Baraka. Wasn’t he the one who launched Newark’s complaint board?”

“Yes. This is why corruption has hit an all-time low! Mason, you must be that type of leader. It doesn’t matter what it takes for you to become one, but you must have the merit required to get to the top. That includes obtaining all As in your classes, connections with other like-minded people, and of course, you must be loved by the people of Newark so you can easily help everyone else, and yourself of course. You don’t have to be a leader, per se, but being able to help others without tampering yourself in the process is adequate.”

Mason’s father walked in with a packet of sugar.

Mason looked at his father. “You know sugar is not suited for your age, right?”

His father looked at him with a questioning face. “Why can’t I just enjoy one day of freedom? This is America, thus, I can do what I want!”

Mason grinned. “Not exactly. ‘Freedom’ doesn’t necessarily mean authority over every aspect of life.” His father sipped his coffee. “It will be best for me to enjoy my quiet, serene life before I reach the sky.” ■



Grades II & I2

A Love Letter to Newark

Naomi Jeffries

Science Park High School | Short Story | First Place

I don't know if I like you.

You've been there my *entire* life. Every single moment, you're there. Someway, somehow. You're like an unwanted presence consuming any space I step into. Clouding the judgment of strangers and inclining their pity. What's your name? What do you like to do? But, the fundamental question is—where are you from? “Newark,” I'd say, with an apparent fear of acknowledging you. Their utmost confusion, disgust, or familiarity, directly follows.

But, they don't know you like I do. I've lived in Newark for 5,840 days. I've spent 5,840 days breathing the air. Trekking the streets. I didn't move here from some affluent land. I didn't commute for the sake of it. I was born here.

I remember my house parked right in the center of Chancellor Ave.

Who could miss it?

It stood tall in its bricked exterior, painted perfectly with an auburn hue. An extended lawn covered its front, oozing green strips from the sprouting soil. Painted white windows with shutter awnings are directly symmetrical from one another. The concrete sidewalks cracked and scarred as if they'd been beaten down by something. Or someone. But, my red house was a sanctuary.

I lived there for 3,650 days. It's my first recollection of a home. Evenings throwing footballs in the setting sky, filling time as we waited for my mother to call us in to eat. The red house was the epitome of a family home. Memories of the bedazzled holiday tree standing tall in our living room, as fire crackled within the hearth. My commuting family members asleep on the couches after another one of my annual beach birthday parties. That red house was purely home.

But, this red house, in all its glory, still wasn't perfect. Regardless of how many people strolled through its interior, or the compliments given to its “growing development” it wasn't permanent. The red house could never be permanent.

The first time I realized this was at ten, sneaking through the oak-ridden floors, I approached the two-locked metal door to the basement. The forbidden basement. For the first time, the metal door was scarcely open, I could tell by the stench. It sinks into your nostrils, the gruesome smell polluting your airways, a coughing fit promised. The smell, courtesy of the irregular floodings in our basement, a mold my father soon grew allergic to, spread across our house.

I still can't forget that stench.

In hindsight, it reminds me now of walking downtown. The smells of the oil-filled river streaming down by NJPAC fumes the air as I walk home. I almost wish I still wore a mask so that I don't have to smell it. Again, I smell it getting off the light rail at Military Park, the entire subway reeks of garbage, mildew, and weed.

But, you know, I got over the stench. Who cares about a little smell? I couldn't smell it outside of the basement so what does it matter?

I return to the joy of the red home. The daily walks in Branch Brook Park, where the cherry blossoms bloomed bubblegum pink in the spring. And where the lake was filled with baby ducks and tadpoles. Kicking soccer balls across the hills of olive grass as we basked in the afternoon sun.

The connecting skating rink was an assortment of joy for my middle school friends and me. Skating along the polished floors, even if we fell and slid multiple times in immaturity. Buying glow-up pacifiers with our last five dollars, and pizza with whatever coins we could find.

I love that skating rink. *Loved*.

Is it possible to love something you haven't seen in almost half a decade?

I haven't been there since middle school. As I grew older, so did you. The shootings weren't avoidable, and as my parents heard the news, that rink was added to the list of forbidden entities.

I still longed to go. Images of the joy I got from that place will never leave my mind. Or maybe it's a typical teenage rebellion.

But, no, I didn't use my graceful footwork to trek to the rink. Or even step near it. But, hey, every place has a few bad things, right?

I return to the joy of my red home. My neighbors were almost like family. I still remember Aunt Linda. Not even close to our 'Aunt' our connection could have fooled you. Her house was humongous, with this Victorian sort of architecture, bricked and castle-like. Her home was directly across the street from ours, and I could see it almost at any part of my red home. Whenever we went to Aunt Linda's house I was always excited, see, she had parrots and two little red hot-dog puppies. For my brother and I, it was almost like a trip to the zoo. How we loved Aunt Linda.

But, the Victorian dream was only short-lived. I still remember my hands gripping the cream-colored chipping windowsill. The night sky covers the horizon like a sheep blanket. I shouldn't have been awake. But, I was undoubtedly preoccupied staring at it. It—being the inflamed car parked right in front of Aunt Linda's home. The red and orange flames engulfed the metal exterior, charring the sides to a dark color. I could hear the sounds of the foundation crippling within the heat and the metal deteriorating as it grew hotter.

My trance was soon interrupted by a bellow and a firm hand on my shoulder, "*Don't look!*" That's you, Newark.

You are the red home. Perfectly imperfect. ■



The Birthplace of Friendships

Lara Parada-Tixe

Technology High School | Short Story | Second Place

There she sat—the girl with the pink shirt—on the ocean blue rug tracing the shape of the letter B. She impatiently sat because she knew what was to come. Her teacher, tall and slender, with her hair absent of color and pulled back from her face, finally announces with her croaky voice, “It’s nap time.” The little girl hurried for her mat and her blanket, laid down, and closed her eyes, hoping she’d fall asleep fast enough to soon play with her friend again. Luckily she woke up in what felt like seconds. The room lit up; chaos ensued as every kid went off to play. She got up and fixed her mat and blanket as fast as possible, knowing her friend was waiting for her.

The room was now a jungle. Children climbed and jumped off whatever they could, screaming from joy and crying from getting hurt, and the little girl was finally playing with her friend. The two girls grabbed the toy vacuum and

broom and cleaned just as their mothers would. They pushed toy shopping carts and giggled at the noise of the squeaking wheels that always managed to irritate the teachers. Their laughter had finally got the best of them; they fell to the floor, still giggling while gasping for air. The other girl claimed that they would be best friends forever. The girl with the pink shirt had caught a glimpse of parents waiting outside the room, looking in through the long glass window, watching their kids have no worries in the world. She saw her parents standing in the doorway, waiting for her to get her things and go home with them, yet the little girl was not ready to leave. She ran to her parents and begged them to take her friend with them as well, and much to her surprise, they said yes. The parents drove throughout Ferry Street, looking for the best restaurant out of countless Ecuadorian restaurants that filled their town, and once it was found, the two girls ran inside, and stood in front of the small freezer, begging the parents for a coconut ice cream pop. Afterward, they rode their little bikes through Branch Brook Park, pretending to run from a monster, giggling as the wind blew through their hair and as the feeling of happiness consumed them. The girls didn't know that their friendship wouldn't last—all they knew was that perfect day.

Once again, there she sat—the girl with the pink shirt—on the cold wooden chair, writing her mother's name on a pink piece of paper to wish her a happy Mother's Day. She tried to write to her mother in Spanish, even though she knew she would most likely fail. The other kids around her also made cards but were so distracted by talking to each other that it seemed like they would never finish. They wouldn't speak to her for reasons she didn't know, and she remained on the cold wooden chair, all alone at her table.

That was until a girl with fair skin and short stature came to sit with her, introduced herself, and claimed they would be best friends. Their friendship bloomed in school, where they would sit and talk about their favorite shows and their love for video games. The girl in the pink shirt giggled as her friend spoke about the boy she liked while trying to develop the perfect plan to get her friend and her crush to sit at the same table. Eventually, they could not contain their friendship within the school's walls, and they started to visit each other's houses, which they found out were conveniently right next to each other. This meant that there would be countless playdates and sleepovers to fuel their best friendship.

Yet as the years passed and the friendship grew, their friendship could not be contained within their houses' walls anymore, and they started to venture outside. Their friendship was now fueled by racing to the nearest corner store for a late-night ice cream pop, dancing in the road with other kids as the water from a broken fire hydrant flooded the streets, and chasing after squirrels that would always pop up in front of one of their houses. They walked on the hot black pavement as they traversed through Branch Brook Park, trying their best not to sneeze as the wind shook the pollen from the trees, and they always tried

to find the perfect tree to climb to take pictures. As they got even closer and older, they started to travel into Ferry Street and made it a goal to taste every cuisine available to them, which they knew would take forever. Downtown also started calling them, and so they rode the bus that always made them feel like sardines into a town resembling New York City. They struggled to walk through sidewalks flooded with people, but the girls pushed through to make their first purchases with money from their jobs. Again, the girls didn't know that their friendship wouldn't last.

Today, the girl with the pink shirt stood in the doorway of a room to pick up her little daughter and her friend, and she took them for ice cream in Ferry Street, walked them through Branch Brook Park, and chased them as they rode their little bikes, watched them as they played in the spraying water from the fire hydrant, and took them to buy toys in Downtown. She watched their faces light up at the sight of all of this fun, and she knew that although her friendships didn't last, it was all ingrained in the history of the town she lived in, and now, she truly saw Newark as the birthplace of friendships. ■

"Nork"

Esther Ojo

Technology High School | Memoir | Third Place

"Nork, Newark... bruh does anybody even go over here"—yes people do. We might pronounce it "Nork" but it is still New-Ark similar to Noah's ark. A city home to different genders, races, ethnicities and religions, my home since 2016.

In this city filled with many beautiful spots like Halsey Street and the Prudential Center, I find myself always on the buses. So many people associate buses with poverty but in Newark, these buses are my safe haven. Even with a driver license, I still can't seem to take myself away from the buses.

The infamous bus 31 that runs every 2 hours. The popular advanced buses 13 and 39 that never miss a stop despite the capacity of the buses. The convenient bus 27 that doesn't stop at my destination but at least gets me somewhere convenient. Bus 24 with the people waiting to get their new dunks from Jersey Gardens Mall. Bus 28 with the hustling airport workers trying to make it to their destination before their clocking in hours. You might be wondering why and how I know so much about the New Jersey transit buses but as a Newark resident, the experiences on the buses can make one remember every detail.



I remember my first time taking the bus as a newly immigrated sixth grader from Nigeria whose family lived about an hour away from her school. I clutched tightly to my bookbag, constantly checking the stops wondering if I was getting close to school. Pulling my hoodie over my frozen ears, I would stare at every passenger that boarded. Not knowing that sometimes drivers do not open the back door, I remember banging on the back door waiting for it to magically open, unable to ask for my help out of embarrassment.

I began to walk back to my seat hoping that at the next stop, someone would want to come from the back but as I walked, an old man that looked about 50 began to yell “Back door.” As he kept yelling, everyone else joined along yelling “Back door” until the driver stopped abruptly to open the door. In gratitude, I meekly said “thank you” and stepped out of the bus. I might have missed my stop but that memory stuck with me. It made me think about the different ways the situation could have gone. I could have gone back to my seat with no one to help and could have gotten lost having missed plenty of stops but I didn’t because people were willing to help me. Newark, a city where strangers will stand up for you no matter who you are. A city where people will stop the bus to make sure you get in. A city where people voluntarily give up their seat for



***Always saying
"thank you" and
"good morning"
to my 6:54 am bus
driver made her
always stop at my
street to pick
me up everytime
she sees me no
matter how full
her bus might be.***

ESTHER OJO

you regardless of how tired they are. I knew from that moment on that this city would be my home for a long time.

Fast forward to 2022 and I am now the person who takes the initiative to yell "back door" for people who were once like me. I am the person who willingly stands up so others could sit. This is about more than just sitting and standing in the bus instead it is about the meaningful values taking the buses through Newark has taught me. It has taught me about the value of having a community and taking part in building it. Despite being an immigrant, I was welcomed into the Newark community with the little action of yelling "back door". A community that is willing to stand by me even though it costs them their time. I was also taught to respect everyone no matter your position in life. Always saying "thank you" and "good morning" to my 6:54 am bus driver made her always stop at my street to pick me up everytime she sees me no matter how full her bus might be.

Now if someone walks up to me to ask where I am from, I am never embarrassed to say "Newark, New Jersey" because they might not know it but I know my city and that is all that matters. 'Newark' or as some say 'Nork' is my home and that is truly all that matters. Brick city forever. ■



What Speaks To Me

Sasha Hector

*Donald M. Payne Sr. School Of Technology | Short Story
Honorable Mention*

“Honk, Honk!”

That is my mother’s car making that noise. “Come on, Malika, we’re going to be late!!!,” my mother said. My younger sister was eating when I hurried down the stairs, and my father was preparing breakfast. I gave my younger sister a head kiss and wished Maria a good day at school. I took my breakfast—scrambled eggs—and headed downstairs to my mother’s car.

My mother, Deborah Rodriguez, is the wife of David Rodriguez, my father. They were married in Mexico before moving to Newark, New Jersey, where they gave birth to my sister and me. “Put your seatbelt on and get ready,” my mom said. I buckle up, begin eating my scrambled eggs, put on my headphones, and start listening to music. Sometimes when I don’t have my headphones I look out the window to see how the world speaks to me. Sometimes, when I don’t



have my headphones on, I glance out the window of my mother's car and I hear music coming from the streets, see neighbors greeting each other, and hear a man reading poetry into a microphone in Downtown Newark. His name was Alejandro. He's like a friend to me when I ask for poetry ideas. I always ask him questions on my way home from school.

"Malika, Malika." Mom tapped on me while her eyes were still on the road. "Give me your headphones, Malika; I don't think you'd pay attention if you weren't wearing them." Mom said.

"Mom, but..." I said.

"No buts," my mother responded.

"You have to get them after school," mom said.

My two best friends, Amelia and Camila, were waiting for me when I entered the building.

"Have you heard the news?" Camila asked.

"What news are you talking about?"

"Principal Evans announced that the Spreading-Awareness event would take place in the heart of Newark", said Amelia.

The bell rang. I said, "See you later." Amelia and Camila said goodbye. I arrived at my English Class, sat down, and thought about what my best friends had said. "In today's class, I want you guys to work on something for the Spreading-Awareness, okay get started," said Mrs. Martinez. My teacher came up to me and said,

"Malika, is everything okay?" said Mrs. Martinez.

"Yeah, but I'm worried about Spreading-Awareness," I replied.

"Well, I know that you love poetry and love listening to music, why can't you do that?" asked Mrs. Martinez.

"I don't know where to begin," I said.

"Take a look around you; everything that you see and feel might be poetry", said Mrs. Martinez. As the school day came to a close, I said farewell to my friends and started walking home. Alejandro appeared to me. "Hey Malika, how's the family doing?" he said. "They're doing well," I said.

"Why are you sad?" he asked.

"Well, my school event is coming, and I have no idea what to do," I said.

"Alejandro habla desde tu corazón y tu mente."

"It means, Alejandro speaks from both your heart and mind, that was what my grandmother said", said Alejandro. It was 4:30 when I looked at my phone to

confirm the time. Alejandro heard me say bye and see you tomorrow. Getting closer to my house, I heard music from the street and looked to see where it was coming from. I was following when I found people laughing and dancing. Then, all of a sudden, I heard people talking and cars honking at the train station. Until everything quickly comes to a stop. I said, “I have an idea!,” and I ran as quickly as I could. “I’ll write a poem about Newark!!!” I said. I was very happy when I got home in my room upstairs. My first action was to take some paper and a pencil and think about how I would begin my poem about Newark. I haven’t written anything in four days. To get some fresh air, I opened my window, and I could hear music playing, people talking, car honking, and trains blowing their horns again. What speaks to me? is the title of my poem. And I wrote:

It is sunny but the feeling is kinda funny. I want to live in a place where love joins people of all races—black, Hispanic, white, etc.—but the most important part is the history of Newark, it made me realize there was something special about it. Gospel, jazz, R&B, Latin music, and more. Poetry singing with words or expressing how we feel, and the arts that describe history. The city’s heartbeat can be heard when I close my eyes, yet when I open them, I see a sign that reads, “This Is The Life in Newark”.

When I read it out to a large audience, I pictured it and heard the applause. On the day of the event, I was anxious and afraid. It felt like a weight was on my shoulders. I performed my poetry, and the audience applauded like they did my vision. This is my city. THE END!!! ■

The Unvarying Question

Mariana Nolasco

Technology High School | Short Story | Honorable Mention

What’s a question you’re tired of hearing? Perhaps the question has something to do with your family, school grades, or plans for the future. For someone living in Newark, New Jersey, that tiresome question is heard as, “What was/is it like living in Newark?” This city has been publicized and keyed as one of the “most criminal and unsafe cities” in the state, an exaggerated misconception. Like any city, Newark has its occasional crimes and overall bad moments. However, Newark’s diverse demographic amplifies the idea that because of the kind of people Newark houses, it is more violent. I have lived in Newark for the entirety of my life and I can truthfully testify that the diverse demographic of this city is the primary factor in unifying and strengthening the sense of community and belonging that is unique to Newark, New Jersey.

Community is an odd thing to describe, or at least it is for me. I believe that the definition of a community depends on the individual defining it. To me,



community is a broad term to describe those who live, study, work, and interact with one another. I have never moved homes in my entire life. I have only ever known one community in all 16 years I have lived. My community consists of long-time family friends, distant and near relatives, and an intense blend of cultures, religions, and races. The first memory I have of recognizing my community is from years back when my mother retold one of my childhood scares. I was around 3 when I mischievously found a way to open the main door and triumphantly walked out of my home. At that young age, I had no sense of direction or potential danger, but I did have a want that needed to be fulfilled. I managed to get into the elevator and roam around the apartment complex floors for about half an hour. Of course, my mother was frantically searching for me, but considering there are 3 separate halls that make up every floor, finding me was not an easy task. It was not until an older man knocked on our apartment door, revealing toddler me to my upset and panicked mother. This older man was not someone my parents were entirely close with, but they knew who he was. At an older age, hearing this story made me realize that although my parents and that man were not close with one another, he still knew whose child I was and where we lived. It opened my eyes to how in my community, even if you don't know someone directly, you are still seen, you are still recognized,

and you are still someone to look out for. My community, as diverse and populated as it is, makes me feel like my presence matters and has some effect on the world. My community proves to me that I was raised in a city of diverse groups that come together as one to look out for one another. In the most dangerous city in the state of New Jersey, a 3-year-old girl got lost and was returned to both of her parents at home, essentially by a stranger, and without a single hair on her head touched. Welcome to my little piece of Newark that I refer to as my community and my home.

Newark has become the place where I feel I belong most. Whenever I visit family who lives outside of Newark, I observe how drastically different our mannerisms, traditions, and way of life are. For Thanksgiving this year, my mother and I went to spend the holiday with family in Clark, New Jersey. Throughout the night, I noticed how my family would look at me weirdly when I talked in “slang,” which was my normal way of speaking. My normal vocabulary is considered informal to them because of how they are taught to communicate with neighbors, surrounding friends, etc. The rest of that Thanksgiving night, I talked less and drifted away from the group. The Saturday after Thanksgiving, some other family I have living in Newark decided to have a “make-up Thanksgiving.” As we did not spend it together, we wanted to still come together to share and be grateful for what we have. In this setting, I felt much more relaxed and less pressured to act “perfect” to make up for the fact that I live in Newark. Living in this city has taught me how to speak, act and think a certain way, a way that singles out everyone from Newark. The fast talking, the exaggerated body language, the emotion in every word flowing out, it all belongs to someone from the city. When with my distant family, they don’t have any of that. They speak slowly and with terms I would never imagine using in a casual conversation like “serendipity.” When around those who were raised in an environment like mine, they understand me as my natural self, the fast talking, exaggerated, and dramatic self, and I can understand them. The pressure of suppressing my daily expressions when around others that aren’t from Newark is lifted when I am around them. I feel most at home when I surround myself with people from Newark. It has been the place where I have grown up, learned life lessons, made valuable relationships, experienced life trials, and overcome them, and most importantly, it is where I became myself. All sense of belonging is found here.

The next time I am asked what it is like to live in Newark, I won’t be annoyed or tired. I’ll be excited. I can share the light of Newark in an attempt to remove all the darkness that has been overshadowing it for so long. Living in Newark is something I am grateful for, despite the ideas of violence in the city. I see Newark, N.J. as a beacon of diversity and inclusion. Our communities are made up of the many cultures, traditions, and influences of families that create a sense of belonging that is unique to Newark. This city will always have a place in my heart, let it take some in yours too. ■

Connections Through Interests

Anie Velez

Technology High School | Essay | Honorable Mention

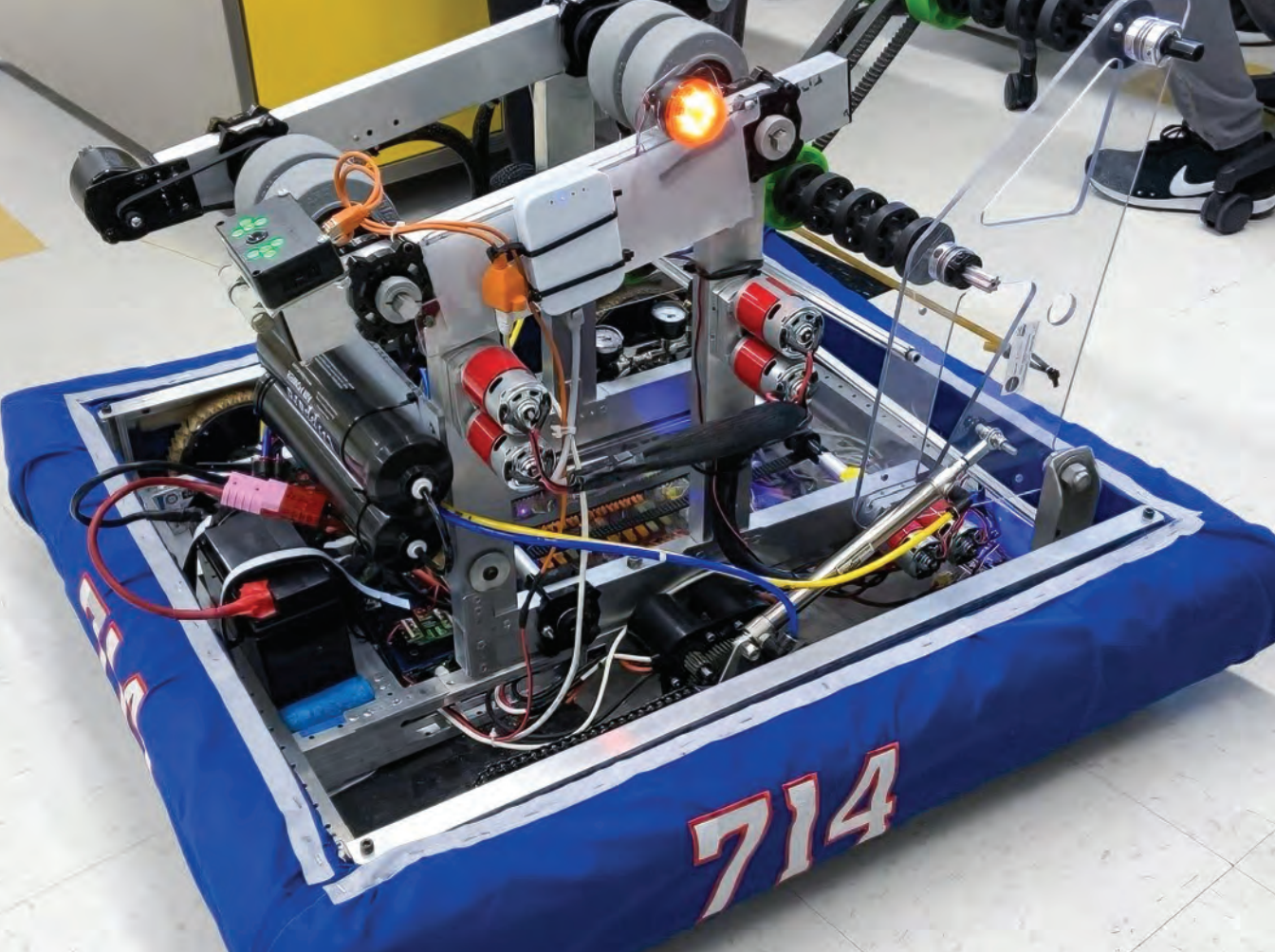
Self-expression is challenging to navigate, especially at a young age. The city of Newark continuously gives me the opportunities to express my interests with others who have similar passions as I do. These activities serve as outlets of expression where I learn to form beautiful connections, whether they are short-term or long-term, that leave everlasting imprints on my mind. Whenever I leave the city of Newark to go to an event where there are people I do not know, I get asked what city I live in out of respectful curiosity. Yet, as I mention the name of my city, eyes go wide, eyebrows rise, and respect waivers. Newark plants negative images in the minds of people who are unfamiliar with it. It garners an abundance of negative attention, and although some of it is reasonable, most is misplaced. Throughout the years, I have gathered beautiful and touching memories of this city and its residents. Newark has a diverse population with different interests, goals, and desires. This city creates organizations to turn these hopes into reality for its people. I once wrote an essay for a class discussing what it means to be a leader. To me, a leader protects their people, but most importantly, they provide their people with the means to flourish and improve in a united society. Newark leads its people. It creates and provides ample opportunities for people with all interests to give them the room to engage in activities that inspire and motivate them.

Throughout my middle school and high school journey, Newark did this. When I was in 7th grade, my English teacher told me our school was participating in the Newark Debate Academy for the first time. I hesitated to join because of my fear of public speaking. However, my teacher assured me I would do well because I could put up an argument, which is the meaning of debate. I joined the team with a group of friends, and my teacher organized a trip to watch a debate competition so we could gather experience before participating in one. We spent the first month after that trip learning how to form a speech and having mock debates in our classroom to gain practice and confidence. At our first competition, I was overwhelmed by how diverse the academy was. People of all ages came from all over Newark, with an equal number of girls and boys. To me, this was significant. I saw myself in many faces at that competition, but I also spoke and learned from many people with different backgrounds than me. I felt connected to those around me and I also felt safe to express myself because they had the same passion. I was excited to be a part of this program despite all of my nerves because of the positive energy surrounding the people in this event: the debaters, the coaches, the judges, the organizers. I met a student from a school far from mine, and we bonded over our interest in debate and our hesitance with public speaking. He expressed his nervousness about the results of the competition,

"Six years after I started robotics, I am still as hooked as I was at the beginning. Throughout the activities I've joined over the years, there were always adults to help guide me down the right paths, and there were always peers to make the experience more entertaining."

and I reassured him that his team would do well. Similarly, I expressed my anxiousness to speak in front of others, and he gave me tips to speak better in front of my opponents. Our teacher cleared up that the competition was not about winning but gaining experience because it was our first one. My partner and I placed and won speaker awards. To this day, I am utterly shocked that we won awards at our first competition. The win was memorable, but the feeling I had after leaving the building can not compare. I was ecstatic to find something I was interested in, fascinated by, and good at that year. Every time a competition neared, I was anxious, but at the same time, I could not contain my excitement. On top of discovering my passion for debate, the Newark Debate Academy allowed me to share my interest with people all over Newark.

Apart from debate, I took up an interest in robotics during middle school. In the 6th grade, my science teacher started a robotics club and encouraged me to join, so I did. I had no idea that I would fall in love with it. I've been doing robotics with the organization US FIRST for six years. Throughout the years, I have had amazing coaches who taught me so much and students who made the years enjoyable. My robotics team in high school has four times the amount of students from my team in middle school, with many more people of diverse backgrounds and skill sets. Yet, we all unite and participate in an activity that brings us joy and satisfaction. Six years after I started robotics, I am still as hooked as I was at the beginning. Throughout the activities I've joined over the years, there were always adults to help guide me down the right paths, and there were always peers to make the experience more entertaining. All a child wants to do is have fun. Newark creates organizations to encourage students to explore their interests with people who have similar desires while making the experience entertaining. In all the programs I've joined over the years, I formed connections with people who understand my passions and encourage me to pursue those interests. My coaches and teachers constantly push me to join these activities because they know the benefits of being surrounded by like-minded individuals at my age when developing a social life is necessary. They motivate and encourage me to perform well in these activities to get the most from the experiences. Although it doesn't seem very significant, the people in Newark have shaped my character and given me confidence and strength. These people are my home, and the programs this city offers allow me to continue forming relationships with all kinds of people all over Newark. ■



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